

BERTHA LINNEA HALLGREN (ORIGINALLY HELLGREN)

Oral History: EDITED VERSION

Birth Date: August 24, 1915. Born in U.S.

Interview EI-632 by Janet Levine, Ph.D. on July 4, 1995

Immigrated from Goteborg (Gothenberg), Sweden at age 8

Arrived on August 4, 1924 on the *Stockholm*

Read the oral history. Jot down answers to the questions as you go along. Then discuss the answers in your group.

Your dramatic skit will focus on the hard decision Linnea and her family had to make at Ellis Island.

LEVINE: This is Janet Levine, and I'm with the National Park Service, and I'm here today in South Yarmouth, Cape Cod, Massachusetts. Ms. Hallgren's first name is Bertha, but she does use her middle name, and that is Linnea. She was born in the United States in Dorchester, Massachusetts, and stayed here until she was six years old, and at that time she went to Sweden with her family and came back just before she was nine years old, in 1924. I'm looking forward to this most interesting and complex story that you have. What was your father's name?



HALLGREN: My father's name was John Hallgren. He changed his name to Hallgren from Hellgren, H-E-L-L-G-R-E-N. But when he first came to this country he was told, well, he can't be called Hell in this country. So he changed it to Hallgren. (she laughs) My father was at sea for a number of years. My mother, Hilda Nordling [shown left in 1924 visa photo], came over here to marry my father. But then after a year she went back to Sweden where my father had a home. And two of the children were born over there.

Then in 1914 the war, the First World War broke out, and Father was still at sea, but he happened to be in Boston at the time. So he wrote to my mother, and he said, "They say that the war is going to come to Sweden, too. Why don't you take the children and come over here? Rent the house out, and come over here and stay here." And so she came over, and they rented a house in Quincy [Massachusetts], and lived happily there as a family until 1920, uh, '21. [Linnea was born during this time, in the United States.]

LEVINE: Were you speaking Swedish at home, even in the United States?

HALLGREN: Yes. All my life my parents spoke Swedish in the home. To this day I cannot multiply in English. I have to multiply in Swedish and translate it into English. I've done that all my life. (she laughs)

Then [her parents] decided, after the war ended, to go back to the home that they had rented out in Sweden. And there they stayed for a couple of years, and the times weren't too good. There

was a lot of unemployment in Sweden just at that time, between 1921 and '24, so in the meantime my brother [Conrad] decided he wanted to come back to the States because he had gone to school here, and so had my sister [Hildegard].

LEVINE: What was your sister like?

HALLGREN: She was a quiet type of girl. She was seven years older, and I can't remember too much of us playing together or doing anything together.

My father couldn't get a job in Solvesborg. So my brother suggested, why don't they sell the house and come back to the States where they had been before, and go back to Quincy where they were established before?

Why did the family come to the U.S. in 1914? Why didn't they stay?

Why did they return to the U.S. a few years later?

Where was Linnea born? Why might this be important later in the story?

They sold the house in Solvesborg, packed the belongings, and set sail for America. And went through all the paperwork, the doctor's exams and all the visa and passports and everything. They were all cleared in Sweden to go to America. They went with the Swedish-American line. I believe it was the MS Stockholm from Goteborg, and they came to New York and then from there they had to go to Ellis Island.

LEVINE: Do you remember your preparation for leaving?

HALLGREN: All I remember there, too, was my father [*shown right in 1926 visa photo*] packing boxes and trunks. I still had about six or seven trunks up in the attic and down in my cellar, those American trunks, Swedish trunks that you'd pack, went on the steamer, big trunks. And I still have them. (she laughs) And they've gone across the ocean many times.



LEVINE: Do you remember any examinations before you left Sweden?

HALLGREN: My parents, from what I understood, had to go through the consulate office, the American Consulate in Malmud [PH], and they were all cleared to go. They had to be examined by the doctor, and everything was supposed to be all right. They had their passports and all the documents and the papers and their health examinations.

LEVINE: Do you remember the voyage?

HALLGREN: I remember I didn't feel too well. Somebody suggested you should eat lemons, so we ate lemons so that we wouldn't get seasick. We went third class. Most of the immigrants in that town, if they didn't have too much money, they'd go third class.

LEVINE: But you do remember Ellis Island?

HALLGREN: Yes. That was the tragedy of the family then. We got to Ellis Island. I don't remember getting off the big ship, the M.S. Stockholm, to get over to Ellis Island, but I remember getting into the Great Hall, I guess they called it.

LEVINE: What did it look like?

HALLGREN: It was huge to my eyes. Uh, we were ushered into a smaller room first. I remember they called my sister's name, and she went. But in the beginning there we were separated. Mother and I were separated, got into one room. My father, we didn't know what happened to him. He got sent off to another section. And then my sister, they took her into another section. We didn't know what happened to her.

And it was about this third day after that that Mother and I sat out in the balcony looking out at the Statue of Liberty, with iron bars around the balcony. And then we looked further down and here was some more balconies, and here my sister was standing in back of one balcony with iron bars, and my father up above her in the other balcony. We just yelled to each other and waved. My sister thought that we had gone through to Boston and left her there, and she had been crying for three days. She didn't know what happened to us. We were just separated.

And then we were taken to the hospital, and first of all my mother and I were told to get into a bathtub. The bathtub was filthy dirty, and my mother, she balked at going in. So the attendant, she said, "You've got to go." So my mother and I got into this dirty bathtub to take a bath. There was such a mixup of fear. A lot of people all over the place, and right now I'm kind of confused just as to what happened.

[At] the hospital, they took all kinds of tests on [her father]. And, uh, my father said to one of the doctors, "I'm not sick." The doctor said, "Well, you'll be sick before you get out of here," he said to him. And they took all kinds of tests, blood tests, and on my mother, too. So, my father and my mother were declared healthy, but they found fault with my sister, first with her eyes. And so they took her to the hospital for an examination. And then finally they declared her feeble-minded.

Why was the family separated at Ellis Island?

What did Linnea's sister think? How did they all find each other?

What does "feeble-minded" mean? How would we describe this condition today?

LEVINE: Do you know why they declared her feeble-minded?

HALLGREN: I really don't know. But they thought that the shock of Ellis Island made her worse. The confusion and the shock of being there and being treated roughly. She was fifteen then, and had never been away from her parents, and she cried, thinking [at first that] she was left there by herself. She cried night and day, but we could get together at mealtime, sit and eat

our meals together in the big hall there, in the dining room. A couple of times a week we were allowed out in the yard where we could play.

They also took my sister to test her in different things. Tested her in games, and arithmetic. But they just declared her feeble-minded, and there was nothing they could do about it. I stayed for two weeks. And then they kept my parents and my sister five more weeks. Seven weeks altogether they were kept at Ellis Island.

In the meantime, they were told to write to Washington to, um, see what they could do. And my brother here in Quincy and the relatives here in Quincy, they did all they could. They even wrote to President Coolidge, and to the congressmen, they could help them get them out of there. The Swedish pastor in New York went to visit them at Ellis Island.

They couldn't keep me there, [since] I was born here, and so then after two weeks the pastor told my parents, "Why don't you let Linnea go to Quincy." They didn't know what to do. So they said, "Okay." I wanted to come to Quincy. My mother said to me, "It'll be a long time before you might see us again." So I had said, "When I grow up, Conrad and I will come visit you, back in Sweden."

I had a little ring that my parents bought for me in Boston with a little red stone. I took it off my finger and gave it to my mother, and I said, "Here, take this and remember me by it." And then we had to rush out. I held my brother's hand and I rushed out where it said "Exit for New York," and rode the train with him up to Boston.

What did the family do to try to stay together in the U.S.?

Why couldn't they stop Linnea—who was still a child—from entering the U.S.?

What decision did the family finally make?

LEVINE: How was life for you with your brother Conrad during this period when your mother, father and sister were gone back to Sweden?

HALLGREN: Well, this was during the time that he took me out of Ellis Island during those couple of years that I was here. First I lived with an aunt and uncle, but then they moved away from Quincy. Then I lived with a lady who was a widow, and she had grown children. I stayed with them the rest of the time. I went to school, and I started school in two or three different schools during that period of time.

LEVINE: So, when you came back to this country and you were in school here, was there any difference between the schools that . . .

HALLGREN: Well, I was ahead of the children . . . when I came to the first grade here, I knew my multiplication tables better than the other kids in the first and second grade. I knew them. But, of course, I couldn't read English, but I learned.

[Meanwhile, her parents] decided, “Well, okay, let's try again [two years later]. Let's go to Boston this time.” So my father said [to] my mother and Hildegard, “I'll go first. In case something else should happen, I'll be alone and you come a month after.” So my father came sailing through to Boston, fine, so we were three here, my father and my brother. And in another month my sister and my mother were ready to sail.

Well, three days before they were ready to sail, my sister said, “I'm not going. You go. Linnea needs you. I'm staying here.” By this time she had a real collapse, a real nervous breakdown. My mother didn't know what to do, so she had to call the doctor, and they had to put her into a hospital. And my mother had to leave her there, her other daughter, in Sweden, to come over here to the rest of the family. My sister stayed there, and she was institutionalized. She died in 1976.

And then after the Second World War, we decided we were going to go back to Sweden, on account of my sister. But it was an awful tragedy, especially for my poor mother and my father, who had a daughter over there they couldn't do anything about. We only stayed a year. From then on it was just back and forth. Finally I went back and I stayed eighteen years from 1950, from '51 to 1970 or approximately that, during that time.

LEVINE: What, how did the family think or talk about the whole experience of . . .

HALLGREN: They didn't. We didn't talk too much about it. Uh, when they were sent back in 1924 to Goteborg, my mother sat and wrote a big, long letter to my brother about all the details, everything that went on from the day one that they got there until the end.

LEVINE: And that manuscript will be on file. At Ellis Island. Can you think about what your family said about it, or how it settled with them as time went on?

HALLGREN: They never forgot. All my life I've felt that it was a tragedy and, of course, back in those days, “feble-mindedness,” that was something to be ashamed of. You didn't talk about it. So that's been kind of the hard thing for me to accept. I have accepted it now. Psychologically they don't use that word any more. It's called sub-normal intelligence. So it's been hard, and then we've gone back and forth so many times, too. And the separations and the tears of saying goodbye to family members.

Who did Linnea live with while her parents were in Sweden for those two years?

Why didn't the sister come over this time? What did Linnea's parents do in response?

How did the family react to the sister staying in Sweden? How do you think they might have felt?

LEVINE: Does this color your family's idea about the United States, the treatment?

HALLGREN: No. They later became American citizens, and they liked America. This was home to them, and we established ourselves in Quincy. And we had a lot of friends. After that, we were together as a family, but my sister was left in Sweden. My mother went over there to visit her every now and then, just on a trip back and forth, and we sent packages to her every Christmas, every birthday. We kept corresponding with her.

LEVINE: Was it the family's idea that this institutionalization had been brought about by the trauma?

HALLGREN: Yes. There was a lot of confusion there for a fifteen-year-old girl, too.

LEVINE: Your sister's condition, was it because she was diagnosed as being underdeveloped intellectually, or was it then an emotional . . .

HALLGREN: No, intellectually. One doctor who had examined her said that she had the mind of an eight-year-old. But now when I think of, look at Ted Kennedy's, at the Kennedy family. They have a sister [Rose] in the same situation. So now I don't mind talking about it. I did before. It was a shame on the family to have somebody who was sub-normal intelligently. But life has gone on.

Then after, after the Second World War, that's when we went back. We took the first ship back after the war. And we stayed there for a year. My brother, Conrad, he met a Swedish girl in 1946 to '47, and she came over here [to the US], and they got married.

But then the year after that, my father and mother said, "Okay, let's go again [to Sweden]." So I went with them. I went up to Stockholm and stayed there for about seventeen-and-a-half years, worked for GM in Stockholm. It's been a very interesting life. But there's been a lot of sadness, a lot of hellos and goodbyes back and forth.

LEVINE: What made you decide to stay in this country?

HALLGREN: Well, all the time that I lived over there, I felt like a foreigner. It's strange. And my Swedish wasn't all that perfect, after I had been, I was educated. Well, I just went through high school in this country, but I just felt as though I belong in the States. I was born here, so I belong here. So then in 1970, after my mother died, I gave up my job at GM and I just packed in all my stuff, and I came back and bought this little house.

LEVINE: Could you say how you think of yourself as far as your Swedish aspect?

HALLGREN: When I'm over here, I long back to Sweden. When I'm over there, I long back to America. That's, I worked together with one lady who was in the same situation. Not through Ellis Island, but her family back and forth across the Atlantic. She says, "You know, the Swedes, they can't make up their mind where they want to be. The Italians, when they go to America they stay there, but not the Swedes. They ought to have an island in the middle of the ocean for the Swedes. They can't decide where they want to be." And that's the way it is. And over here I just long back to Sweden. When I'm over there, I just want to get back home here. It's strange.

LEVINE: How does it feel now that you're sort of re-looking at a chapter that wasn't a very pleasant one in your background?

HALLGREN: Well, it happened, and there's nothing you can do about it. It's one of the things that you had to go through in life, and I've gone through it, and my family went through it, with God's help. I'm very religious, and I still am. I go to church every Sunday. I still have that belief that the Lord is with me.

According to Linnea, did the family feel angry toward the U.S. for not allowing her sister to enter the country? Why or why not?

After this, Linnea and her family kept going back and forth between Sweden and the U.S. Why didn't they stay in one country or the other?

Do you believe that Linnea's experience in 1924 (separation from her parents) affected her choices later on? Support your opinion with details from her oral history.

GRAPHIC ORGANIZER for Ellis Island Oral History

NAME of immigrant: **LINNEA HALLGREN**

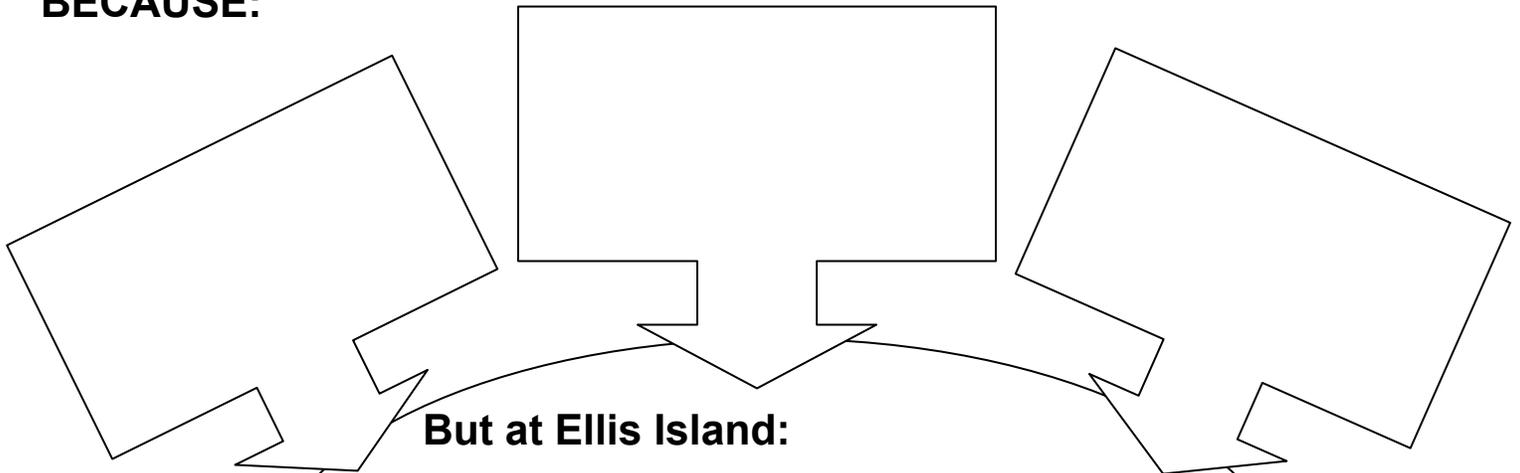
FROM: _____

YEAR she came to the US: _____

AGE upon arrival: _____

PUSH-PULL: Why did her family decide to come to America?

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